

The Narrative of the Street in Ancient Greece

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There is therefore no real architectural plan, no strict organization of the buildings in reciprocal relation. Each building, especially each temple, is in the first instance an individual, constructed for its own sake and beautiful as an *agalma*. ... The symmetrical layout of temples, colonnades, stairways and altars was the product of Hellenistic architects designing great temple complexes for new foundations.

— Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion (Archaic and Classical)*, (Oxford, 1985): 94.

INTRODUCTION

In this text I would like to put forward the hypothesis that the architecture of the street in Ancient Greece which begins to emerge during the archaic period, follows a narrative pattern: the *agalmata*, precious statues which serve a mnemonic function, referring to a personality, myth or incident, rise on either side of the streets. Their diversity and the actual movement and gaze of the passer-by connect these entities and form the narrative. As typical examples for this presentation, I shall use the sacred Greek streets and those which led from the gates of the cities to the *agora*. They were all used as “memory lanes,” with monuments depicting all eras and every type of benefactor. It is their diversity that actually leads to this narrative character and this becomes more evident when we compare the Greek streets to the *dromoi* of Ancient Egypt.

EGYPTIAN DROMOI AND GREEK STREETS

The only streets that remain today in the archaic Greek sanctuary, paved or simply traced, around and inside the sanctuary, are mostly lined with statues offered to gods. As representative examples we may cite the sanctuary of Hera in Samos, with the monument of Geneleos and the enormous *kouroi*, the sacred street of the Apollo sanctuary in Miletus, the streets in Delos and the sanctuaries at Ptoion. Scholars have quite often drawn comparisons between the arrangement of these streets and the alignment of the Egyptian sacred streets.¹ In fact the Egyptian sanctuaries were approached by some sort of sacred street. The name used by archaeologists for this type of street is *dromos* and Strabo actually describes it.²

These *dromoi* connected the great sanctuaries and were used for processions of the great Egyptian feasts, the most important of which being the one of Opet.³ The statues that stood on their edges probably played the role of guards of the entrances.⁴

Various types of *dromoi* have been dug up by the archaeologists. Most of them belong to the temples of Karnak. The *dromos* that leads from the temple of Luxor to the one of Karnak, allows us to trace the image of the typical *dromos*, according to F. Traunecker, although it is a good millennium more recent than the actual temples that it connects:

The avenue of Sphinx begins at the gate of Luxor. It is bordered laterally by two walls made of crude brick at a distance of 27 metres between them. The *dromos* is, therefore, a space entirely closed, a type of antenna lengthening the sacred area encircled by the high walls of the temple... Sphinxes occupy only a part of the two side spaces of the street. ... The rest of the space is enriched with gardens watered by a complete irrigation system.⁵

It is not only the arrangement of the statues that is similar to the Greek streets. It is also their style. Thus, the so-called Branchides, the statues of the priests of the sacred street of Miletus remind us of the statues of the seated figures of Egypt, but also of the statues of the goddess Sekhmet, who has a woman's body and the head of a lioness, depicted standing or seated on a seat that is seen throughout the temple of Mout at Karnak.⁶ We may observe the same for the static character, the monolith and the absence of any movement that pertain practically to all sculptures of the archaic sanctuary. It is because of this similarity that it has been suggested that it was artists educated in Egypt who created these works⁷ or that the monumental sculptures of the VIIth century are “borrowed” by the Egyptians.⁸ Even if this is true, it could not apply to Greece, as the same spatial arrangement could not be possible due to the geomorphic differences of the Greek landscape. In Egypt the sacred streets cross the expanses of the desert. In Greece, they cross the hills or run close to them. The height of the statues is not the same and although they are sometimes similar, they are not identical. The distance that divides them is not regular and they do not always depict the same subject. In brief, the architectural landscape of a sacred Greek street is not homogeneous but varied. This contrasts heavily with the character of the Egyptian streets.

In order to list certain distinctive traits, we need also to ask questions relating to: the direction of these streets, their purpose, their connecting point with the space of the trajectory of the interior of the sanctuary, their exact shape, the nature of their statues, the origin of the offerings and who bears the responsibility for the placement of these offerings. In Greece, the ex-voto offerings by individuals or the whole city are placed on either side of the street, which develops with the times. In Egypt, it is the Pharaoh that decides at a certain moment the placing of the Sphinx having in mind a complete architectural programme, where each element belongs to a fixed and special place: the statues are regularly spaced and are totally homogeneous. They have a sacred and “repellent” character. In front of them there is often an effigy of the King, a sacred being, and the inscriptions that are inscribed are always about him. In Greece, the statues are men or women, individuals seated or standing. There are often inscriptions engraved on the offerings, which indicate the God to whom they are addressed. But they also indicate the inscriber or the donator. In Egypt, the *dromos*

is often perceived as a closed space, forming an entrance to the temple and connecting it to a dock or to other temples and sanctuaries, whereas in Greece the street is never defined by a wall unless it is part of the perimeter of a sanctuary and, it connects on the one side a temple and on the other a city. In Greece, finally, the offerings are of the same nature as the sacred buildings- temples or treasures, the difference is insignificant.

Briefly, the Egyptian built space is totally different to the Greek one.⁹ The *temenos* (Greek sanctuary) is well-defined, cut from the rest of the space as its name demonstrates. The same applies to the elements that belong to the interior of a *temenos*: the sanctuary, the temple and the offerings (statues, treasures, temples) have the semantic form and value of an object and form distinctive unities which take their rightful place in space. This form of a defined object in every element of the *temenos* is what leads to the differentiation of the whole of the built space. Every element in the sanctuary represents a unity and every unity is reshaped as an object surrounded by a vacuum and offered to the gaze of the visitor. This characteristic, in combination with the origin of the offering and the intention of displaying it in public, leads to diversity, the *poikilia* of the offerings, which is the distinctive trait of the Greek built space.

We must insist upon the uniqueness and diversity of these statues, primarily because they are combined with offerings of all other forms, like the buildings for example (treasuries). This diversity pertains also to the nature of the offerings (the *kouroi* and the *korai* are offerings by individuals, by different people) and relates in the end to the artistic plan. Every statue is different and this is underlined not only by the engraved inscriptions but also by their placement. Every *agalma* like every cluster of *agalmata* (i.e. the one of Genelaos) occupies a place (the choice of which is the outcome of a separate decision) and both sides of the street become gradually fuller with the passing of time. Although the architect of the sanctuary does not want to clutter the space, which may compromise the aesthetics, he does not establish a layout at the very beginning, as is the case with the *dromoi*.¹⁰ When placing the offerings the concern is equally divided between sculptures and buildings, like in the case of treasures, which are placed in the same line with other sacred objects.

The statues, which lie on the sides of the archaic sanctuary streets, have, therefore, an individual character. However there is more: not only does each one bear its own history, as there is an inscription or a name, but also their position contributes to the narrative for the passer by who visits the sanctuary. For they are almost always aligned (Ptoion, Didymes, Samos) and this alignment of such diversified offerings opens the possibility of a narrative approach to space, which is less apparent now than what it will be later in the examples of architectural pediments.

What it is about here is an abstract interpretation of the narrative, which presupposes the existence of a visitor and his movement of passage between these alignments that provide the framework of the street's era. In the case of pediments the visitor stands still. His gaze embraces the whole of the composition. It is therefore the movement of the depicted figures that recites the narrative. In juxtaposition, in the case of the streets, the main theme is the visitor himself. His passage unites the various objects placed on either side of the street.

We could say that the arrangement represents the narration of the entrance. The statues tower over the two sides of the path. They actually receive the visitor and stay with him right up to the end of his passage. They may also be interpreted as consecrated objects. The visitor then, reads on them the name of the one who dedicated them, of the artist who made them and learns about the occasion that gave birth to this offering.

The narrative intention of their placement is shown also by the terms that are assigned to these offerings, and the inscriptions that are engraved on them.

TERMS USED FOR OFFERINGS

First they are valuable objects, and they are often assigned by their inscriptions as ornaments, as *agalmata*.

Hesychius writes that the *agalma* is "what brings forth joy." According to Louis Gernet "the word *agalma* expresses mostly the notion of wealth ... And this is inseparable from another notion suggested by a certain etymology of the word: the verb *agallein* from which it comes signifies at times to adorn and to honour."¹¹

These *agalmata* form the *anathemata* (offerings). One of the meanings that the dictionary of Liddell-Scott-Jones gives for the verb *anatihemi* is "to dedicate," "to stand as a votive offering." The verb has equally the meaning "to erect." Therefore, the offering, that has the principal role of pleasing the god, is made in order to be placed somewhere. In addition the root from *anathema* (offering) and *thesis* (place, position) is common to both. The offering occupies a definite place and is offered to the gaze of the visitor. Buildings also can form *anathemata*. They are put together with statues and the inscriptions on their facades are reminiscent of the donator or even the occasion for these gifts. Often enough these buildings form series like those of the statues.

There exists, therefore an equation that makes the word *anathema* almost synonymous to *agalma*.¹² But there is also something more: in the epics, the term *agalma* is used in terms of gift exchange (*dōron*) since it is precious objects, usually movable, that are offered. These gifts create joy (*aglaa dōra*) and sometimes are referred to also as *agalmata*,¹³ a word which as we have seen, may have a common root to the verb *agallein*. The goal of the offering is the conservation of memory.

When Telemachus for example visits Menelaus in Sparta, Menelaus invites him to stay at his palace for another ten to twelve days so that he has time to prepare him his gifts:

Then I will send you forth with honor and give you splendid gifts, three horses and a well-polished chariot; and besides I will give you a beautiful cup, that you may pour libations to the immortal gods, and remember me all your days.¹⁴

And Alkinoos, when offering Ulysses his present, he says:

And I will give him this beautiful cup of mine, wrought of gold, that he may remember me all his days as he pour libations in his halls to Zeus and to the other gods.¹⁵

THE VISIT AND THE READING OF THE BUILT-UP SPACE

The notion of memory preservation appears again in Herodotus.¹⁶ Pausanias also, when he visits the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi, he writes that he will remember the offerings which, according to him, are worth mentioning.¹⁷ He does the same, when he visits the crepis of Altis at Olympia and or the inside of the treasure of Sicyonians.¹⁸ We see, therefore, that to the notions of the offering (*anathema*) and beautiful offering (*agalma*) we add the notion of memory (*mneme*).

Through their form, their value, their engraved inscriptions, the offerings remind us or the one who considers them as an incident, or a presence, human or divine. The beautiful offerings impress the visitor or the passer-by. They are worth looking at¹⁹ and furthermore to be mentioned, to be preserved in memory. The *agalmata*, which are *anathemata* play the role of *mnemata*.²⁰ The one who received the gift is reminded, every time he uses it, of the one who gave it to him. From a personal reminder recognised only by the one concerned which disappears after death (but never immortalised in the epics), the *agalma* becomes an object that preserves this memory forever by extending it out to everyone who looks at it. Thus, it finally becomes an object of remembering, something designated to be mentioned, and a living memory in people's minds even after the object's disappearance, through the writings of the people who have seen it

in the past (Herodotus, Pausanias). We assume that it is, in fact, this function of memory which interests the donors, or those who erect a monument. The monuments, which for the archaic period are the *agalmata* of the gods, the statues, the precious objects or even whole buildings like the temples or treasures, are objects that become fixed in memory. This process is the result of the presence of the objects and recalling them becomes possible because of the place that the object occupies, its position (*thesis*). The function of remembering an *agalma* is activated by the gaze of the passer-by.

A very ancient example that demonstrates the narrative unfolding by means of visible constructions (but not inscribed) which the passer-by comes across on his way, is found in the *Iliad*. It is the passage where Hector appears in front of his army, Achaean and Trojan, demanding an opponent for a duel. There, he promises that if he kills his opponent, he will keep his opponent's arms but return the body to the Achaeans for burial. The *sema* of his opponent is then going to be put "on the coast of large Hellespont," and later, someone returning from the sea, will say that this is the *sema* of a brave man who long ago lost the battle with the valiant Hector; thus, Hector's *kleos* will never be forgotten.²¹

The *sema*, of which Hector speaks, translates according to J.P. Vernant in respect to *semata* and the *colossi*, "the paradoxical inscription of absence inside the presence."²² The visible evokes here in a way the invisible. It invites us to think and to imagine the person but also the history of the person concerned and to perpetuate in this way the personal *kleos*. Moreover, according to G. Nagy: the *sema* (sign) is inseparable to noesis (thought) and consequently to an *agnôrisis*.²³

The inscriptions complete the already existing "reading" of the built-up space. It is especially evident on the funeral monuments also erected on the streets, where the inscriptions are of the same style as the one presented to the passer-by on the hypothetical tomb of Hector's opponent. In fact, according to a study on this particular subject, the findings for example of the *kouroi* and *korai* in Attica divide into two lines which are found along two important routes: the first is the one leading away from Athens and passing through Hymettos leads to Sounion, the most distant port of Attica and the second is the one that leads to the gate of Piraeus in Phaleron, the port of Athens during the archaic period.²⁴ According to the same study, these divisions of space are intentional: They concern the social function of the monument, which addresses the passer-by and is built and inscribed in order to be seen. A similar function is also served by the clusters of funereal monuments laid out since the geometric period all along the streets and routes, especially on the edges of the cities.

These inscriptions do not only take into account the passer-by: they address him since he is the messenger of what is inscribed. Some of those refer to their position near the street (*eggus odoio*) and to the movement of the passer-by. They even ask the person to stop and read them. This proves that the way these are lined up on the streets is not accidental. If we also note that they are written in verse and that some of their expressions are after the epic style, we are forced to conclude that their narrative function, which goes hand in hand with their mnemonic function, is intentional. From the street lined up with these *semata*, the passer-by is able to compose some sort of epic as he connects one to another following his/her path.

In one of this type of inscriptions, coming from Haliarte, the passer-by offers a service to the dead person by reading it. He is also thanked at the same time.²⁵ In another, coming from Athens, it is inscribed that Archeneos, the father of the dead person (who used to be a good and wise man) has erected this tomb on the side of the street.²⁶ The expression "this *sema* near the street" is repeated in a number of other inscriptions, where information on the dead person and the cited names form fragments of a narrative which the passer-by is able to complete with the help of the one who is represented in the monument.

For example, Prokleidas was killed in action for his homeland: "This *sema*, on the side of the street, evokes Prokleidas, who dies

when fighting for his country."²⁷

The monument of Theosemos was erected by his friend Anphianax²⁸, whereas Philodemos and Anthemion whom the destiny of death has taken them, share the same *sema*.²⁹ In other epigrams it is asked from the passer-by to stop and cry by the monument.³⁰ Amongst them there are some that stress the actual journey, the movement of the passer-by and oppose his stopping and the pause in front of the monument.³¹

In the Athenian Kerameikos, the passer-by on his way out of the city through the gates of the walls, comes across numerous monuments. It is enough to read Pausanias on his approach to the ^{agora}³²; on the sacred street of Eleusis, through the gates and up to the Acropolis, he describes and enumerates a number of monuments relevant to the history of the city (the tombs of Armodios and Aristogeiton), to the mythical and religious aspects, even to the history of certain important figures. It emerges that the street leading to the agora and crossing the cemeteries is organised along the same narrative principles of the sanctuary streets. The diversity of the monuments and the way they are lined up on a part of the street puts in motion a potential narration of the public space.

We conclude, therefore, that in Greece, during the Archaic period, the streets begin to emerge on the sides of a sanctuary, in the agora or in a cemetery thus composing a very special structure where on each side of the street, distinct but varied objects, are placed in a series. This arrangement and the concrete form of the objects are in a position "to speak" about themselves and the inscription that they bear furthers the narration already existent in the form. Thus, we detect the beginning of narration in Greek figurative art as a combination of sculpture in architectural space understood through motion. In other words, we may assign to the positioning of objects along the Greek streets a certain narrative structure which is not predetermined but one that the visitor has to decipher; the role of the passer-by in the unfolding narrative is, therefore, active.

NOTES

- ¹ Ch. Picard, *Manuel d'archéologie grecque, tome I: La Sculpture*, (Paris, 1935), pp. 419-420.
- ² Strabo, *The Geography* (Cambridge Mass. and London: Loeb, 1949): vol. VIII, book XVII, p. 28.
- ³ W. J. Murnane, "La grande fête d'Opet," *Histoire et Archéologie, Les Dossiers 101* (janvier 1986), pp. 22-24. See also: L. Gabolde, "L'itinéraire de la procession d'Opet" pp. 27-28 and L. D. Bell, "Les parcours processionnels": 29-30, in: *Histoire et Archéologie, Les Dossiers 101* (janvier 1986).
- ⁴ C. De Wit, *Le rôle et le sens du lion dans l'Égypte ancienne* (Leiden, 1951), p. 82.
- ⁵ F. Laroche-Traunecker, "Les statues gardiennes de Karnak," *Histoire et Archéologie, Les Dossiers 61*, pp. 37-38. See also: M. Abd El-Raziq, "L'allée de sphinx," *Histoire et Archéologie, Dossiers 101* (janvier 1986), pp. 32-33 and A. Cabrol, *Les dromos des temples thébains au Nouvel Empire Egyptien* (Mémoire de Maîtrise, Paris IV, Sorbonne, 1991).
- ⁶ F. Laroche-Traunecker, "Les statues gardiennes de Karnak," *Histoire et Archéologie, Les Dossiers 61*, p. 42.
- ⁷ C.T. Newton, *A History of Discoveries at Halicarnassus, Cnidus and the Branchidae* (London, 1863), pp. 549-552.
- ⁸ A. Snodgrass, *Archaic Greece. The Age of Experiment* (London-Melbourne-Toronto, 1980), french edition: *La Grèce archaïque*, (Paris, 1986), pp. 152-153.
- ⁹ Br. Bergquist, *The Archaic Greek Temenos: A Study of Structure and Function* (Lund, 1967), p. 130.
- ¹⁰ A. Jacquemin, *Offrandes monumentales à Delphes* (Thèse de Doctorat d'État, Paris I, 1993), p. 199-202. On the role of the architects of the city see the more general work of: R. Martin, *L'Urbanisme dans la Grèce antique* (Paris, 1974), p. 69.
- ¹¹ L. Gernet, *Anthropologie de la Grèce antique*, (Paris,

- 1982,(1968)), p. 127.
- ¹² “It is not only because an object has a religious use that it is called an agalma but also because it is valuable that it is an offering”: L. Gernet, *Anthropologie de la Grèce antique* (Paris, 1982 (1968)), p. 174.
- ¹³ *Odyssey*, XVIII, pp. 299-300.
- ¹⁴ *Odyssey*, IV, pp. 589-592.
- ¹⁵ *Odyssey*, VIII, pp. 430-432.
- ¹⁶ Herodotus, History I, pp. 14, 5-6.
- ¹⁷ Pausanias, X, 9, pp. 1-2.
- ¹⁸ Pausanias, VI, p. 19.
- ¹⁹ Herodotus, I, 25, pp. 3-6.
- ²⁰ M. Simondon, *La mémoire et l'oubli dans la pensée grecque (jusqu' à la fin du VIe siècle avant J.-C.)*, (Paris, 1982), p. 82.
- ²¹ *Iliade*, VII, pp. 86-91.
- ²² J.-P. Vernant, *Figures, Idoles, Masques* (Paris, 1990), p. 28.
- ²³ G. Nagy, “Sêma and Noësis: Some illustrations”, *Arethusa* 16 (1983), pp. 34-55. On the reading of the inscriptions see also: J. Svenbro, *Phrasikleia*, (Paris: La Découverte, 1988), pp. 22-23.
- ²⁴ Anna Maria d’Onofrio, “Korai e Kouroi funerari attici,” *A.I.O.N., Archeologia e Storia Antica IV* (1982), pp. 135-170.
- ²⁵ P. Friendlander, *Epigrammata. Greek Inscriptions in verse. From the Beginnings to the Persian Wars (=Epigrammata)* (Chicago, 1987 (1948): 14 = IG VII 2852. On the form of the greek funerary monuments, see G. M. A. Richter, *The Archaic Gravestones of Attica* (London, 1961). On the formulas of dedication see: M. L. Lazzarini, “Le formule delle dediche votive nella Grecia arcaica”, *Mem. Linc.* VIII, XIX 2 (1976).
- ²⁶ *Epigrammata*, 35 = IG I 974.
- ²⁷ *Epigrammata*, 74 = IG IX 1. 521.
- ²⁸ *Epigrammata*, 75 = IG I 473.
- ²⁹ *Epigrammata*, 75 = IG I 1026a.
- ³⁰ *Epigrammata*, 82, 86 = Polemon 2 (1938): 81sq = REG 52 (1939): 463sq, n. 105.
- ³¹ *Epigrammata* 87-88 = IG I 971.
- ³² Pausanias, I, pp. 3-29.